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ABSTRACT

Placing literature in the core of the curriculum, along with lots of writing and some listening and speaking activities, is a wonderful idea, one which most good English programs and teachers have always used, even through the electives and the back-to-basics periods of recent years. The gap lies in the teaching of writing, especially knowledge about the notion of writing as a developmental process from conceptualization to publication. Any discussion of core curriculum in literature ought to start with the definition of terms, since several interpretations of a term are possible. The moves towards standardization of curriculum, towards a "classic novels" core curriculum, inevitably leads to exclusion, inequality, and failure. Another idea, that of cultural literacy, is now advanced as a rationale for developing a core curriculum, but a close examination of the concept offers a narrow and somewhat elitist view of the aims of schooling--the teaching of "words to share in common" so that Americans can develop a common cultural literacy. Core curriculum efforts that promote critical applications of knowledge, foster independent thinking and action, and recognize and celebrate diversity need to be supported. A return to the days of sameness for all in the English classroom, which is a probable by-product of a core curriculum in literature, is not a move in the right direction. (NKA)

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Speech at the NCTE Convention, San Antonio, Texas, Nov.22, 1986

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Developing a Core Curriculum in Literature - an Undesirable Idea

When I told my California colleagues that I was asked to present the con arguments about a core curriculum in literature, they snickered and told me that I was fighting against a tide. Well, I've been pushing against tides for all of my professional life, so this one is nothing new. Let me make some introductory remarks about my own positions and present some definitions before the arguing starts.

First, I think that we have to recognize the difference between putting literature in the core of the curriculum and developing a "core curriculum" in literature. As I read and discuss the place
of literature in the schools these days, my sense is that people don't make the distinctions between these two ideas and therein lies a bit
of the confusion.

Placing literature <u>in</u> the core of the curriculum, along with lots of writing and some listening and speaking activities is a wonderful idea, one which most good English programs and teachers have always done, even through the "electives" period and the back to basics period of recent years. Studying good literature in the secondary schools has taken prominence, and well it should, given the expectations of the public and its elected boards, the consumers of the graduates of our high schools, and

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the democracy in which we live. Literature study is indeed a way of introducing children and adolescents to much of the rich past and the lively present. So let's recognize that, in this talk, leaving literature in the center, the core so to speak, is fine, nice, a good idea, never to be discarded, etc.

One more thought on this, however. One of the reasons that the National Writing Projects have been so well received and have been so long lasting in their staff development efforts may very well stem from past practices of excluding WRITING from the core of the curriculum. Most of us who were trained in English departments in the 60's and 70's studied enough literature to last us a lifetime and beyond. The gap in our training was in the teaching of writing, especially knowledge about the notion of writing as a developmental process from conceptualization to publication. Those notions, while around in the texts about rhetorical theory, were seldom translatable to those who were prospective English teachers. Thus, it was literature study which went from the college classroom to the secondary classroom, often in the same lecture/presentational mode in which most of college teaching is done. A mistake no doubt, but a reality nevetheless.

As we learn more about the teaching of writing, professionals around the country recognize that the core of the curriculum has to contain more, and more varied, types of writing assignments, that some of these assignments should deal with the literature that students are reading, and that expository writing is only one mode, and should not be the only mode in which

students are asked to write. Thus my further position is that, included in the core of the curriculum with literature study is a solid program of writing activites concerned not only with explicating literary texts but also with developing a student's voice, his/her sense of audience and purpose, and with training in various modes of discourse so that graduating students will have a wide repertoire of writing choices to take with them into the world after secondary education.

A second point - when discussing the notion of a "core curriculum" in literature we need to define that term as well. Some writers suggest that the concept means all students read the same material in the same grade level in every school in the district. Others suggest that the concept means studying only classics of literature that have stood the test of time. These seem to be the only works worth the time and effort of in-depth study in English classes, with all other literature consigned to extended reading or recreational reading. Still others view the core curriculum in literature as including only those books and other pieces of literature which transmit something called "our cultural heritage," the OUR being rather undefined, as if there were general agreement on who the OUR was and whose culture is represented by the term "our cultural heritage." I submit that all of these definitions are indeed possible and that all of these definitions are limited. Any discussion that you have regarding a core curriculum in literature ought to start with the definition of terms and with the valuable distinctions to be made by acceptance of one definition or another, or by including all

of these ideas and others in the local definiton of core curriculum.

As I was reviewing some of the discussion on the importance of developing a core curriculum in literature, I was struck with the sense that we educators again refuse to learn from the lessons of the past and are doomed to repeat our mistakes in succeeding generations. The moves toward some standardization of curriculum, toward classics in the English classroom, toward raising the standards of reading (whatever that means) remind me of the lessons I thought we were taught in the 50's and 60's. That is, a classic core curriculum, one which is highly prescriptive even if locally chosen, inevitably leads toward exclusion, toward inequality, and toward failure. We need only remember Silberman's 1970 book, Crisis in the Classroom and then pick up Goodlad's recent book, A Place Called School, to see that schools still are pretty boring, lifeless places for many students, and that many students feel alienated from school because of inaccessibility to the real, to the relevant, to the concerns of feelings and emotions, and instead are faced day after day with uninteresting material, boring assignments, teachers who present classic material without making connections to the present or future lives of their pupils. Some students see socialization as the only saving grace of coming to school every day. I submit that if we are not careful in what we do, we may return to those same conditions in the schools which led to the revolutions, protests, and destructions in the 60's and 70's. Sure I know that Vietnam was the central focus, and so were the

assassinations, but so were the conditions in the educational systems of the country, especially in the urban districts, which fostered the possibilities of revolt and dissension and the cries for change.

What was going on in English classes during that time? The classic curriculum, the core literature program, everybody reads only dead authors, reads mostly old Americana, or old Britishers, possibly some other Europeans, certainly no minority authors, and certainly no comtemporary writers - after all, they "haven't stood the test of time" have they. Is this a danger in the present discussions about the core curriculum? You bet it is, even though state education departments and local curriculum developers warn against it. We do what we know best, and what we have been trained to do best is to know and understand classic literature, adult contemporary materials, and those specialized readings which have no place in the secondary schools anyway. So when we go on to develop core curricula, what do we choose for intensive, in-class study? The classic, stood the test of time, safe, material we know (and which we probably studied when we went to high school ourselves). It's a circular process, one not liable to be broken by a return to a highly prescriptive, highly traditional, and highly inaccessible core curriculum, no matter how egalitarian such a move might appear on the surface.

Well now that I have you saying things like, "not in my school" or "can't happen in my district," let me move on to a different topic which also appears to be central to the move toward a core curriculum in literature, namely the concept of

"cultural literacy", a strongly appealing rationale for develping a core curriculum. E.D. Hirsch, Jr. is alternately praised and blamed for promoting the notion of cultural literacy in his American Scholar article in 1983. People make reference to this article quite frequently as a justification for developing a core literature curriculum, even though Hirsch recently has denied that he meant that cultural literacy should necessarily lead one to a core curriculum (see his article in the October 1985, EJ and a more recent article in the ADE journal)

One could certainly find reason to believe that if cultural literacy is your aim the core curriculum has to be your game.Hirsch proposes such ideas as establishing a National Board of Education which "could present broad lists of suggested literary works for the different grades, list broad enough to yield local freedom but also to yield a measure of commonality in our cultural literary heritage. The teachers whom I know, while valuing their independence, are eager for intelligent guidance in such matters." Hirsch, like other writers always includes "local control" over the choices, but it seems to me that such arguments are inherently self defeating. If there is such an entity as a cultural literacy that all of us should hold in common, then common readings and study seem the only way to go. If not, then why make such proposals.

Upon closer examination of Hirsch's statements, however, one finds a somewhat narrower definition of cultural literacy. He seems to suggest that it's not in-depth study that yields common knowledge, but rather knowing the words and terms that a "common

reader of a newspaper in a literate culture could be expected to know." He implies that one minimal aim of our schooling is to decide on a knowledge of certain values and a knowledge of "such things as the first amendment, Grant and Lee, and DNA's, for example. "Acculturation into a literate culture could be defined as the gaining of cultural literacy." If one read this article as I did, with the aim of showing the con side to the development of a core curriculum in literature, one could easily come to the conclusion that Hirsch said very little, offered circular arguments, had not recently been in secondary school classrooms, and most importantly, has a narrow and somewhat eletist view of the aims of schooling. Indeed he says that America might remember the pre-1900 days of what amounted to a national core curriculum, and to the 1901 CEEB uniform lists of texts required to be known by students in applying to colleges. He goes on to claim that "the decline in our literacy and the decline in the commonly shared knowledge that we acquire in school are causally related facts." Then he defines the decisive piece of evidence for his claim as the decline in the verbal SAT scores among the white middle class, noting that the verbal SAT is a rough index to the literacy levels of our students. Lastly, he states, "knowledge of words is an adjunct to knowledge of cultural realities signified by words, and to whole domains of experience to which words refer." Thus the school curriculum has to teach "words to share in common" so that Americans can develop a common cultural literacy.

I think that the argument is specious at best. And further, the leap made by some core curriculum proponents from these proposals to the development of a core of literary works to be studied by all is even more specious, since Hirsch himself writes in the same paragraph, "when we begin to teach specific knowledge, we are led back inexorably to the contents of the school curriculum, whether or not those contents are linked, as they used to be, to specific texts." Not a very persuasive statement for developing a common set of texts to be read by all, is it? I commend a thorough reading of Hirsch's original article and the several follow up articles before citing him, or cultural literacy, as the reason for considering a core curriculum in literature.

I'd now like to present a few more notions that I disagree with regarding the necessity of a core curriculum. These notions are taken from published materials in California, and are probably representative of similar discussions going on in many other places. Then I will end with some suggestions of my own for your consideration and reaction.

From the book Literature for All Students, a product of the California Literature Project: Great works of literature should be taught as the embodiments of the central human issuse and values, since these works are the heritage of every person in this country. Now who could quarrel with those noble words? But I submit that they are so vague that no one could do much with them either.

Next - all students receive the same essential education in fine readings, solid issues, and meaningful writing, although the approach varies according to individual needs. The meaning of this? If the students can't read the material or handle the concepts, teach the stuff anyway by records, films, or live performances, provide abundant background information, and be sure to "represent the vast heritage and to pass it on the the next generation." Translation, expose kids to the classics in spite of themselves, for we know best. Reading is not the important thing here, coverage somehow takes precedence.

Third - first level works should be read thoroughly and comprehended in-depth by all our secondary students (at least half of whom will have no chance later to study them - either because they do not go on to college or because, once there, they don't study literature). Explanation, get 'em now because this is our last chance. A really old notion of the purposes of schooling, and one which returns us to a place I don't think we should be returning to.

Last - from the Claifornia Model Curriculum Standards comes these two suggestions: students should encounter the plays of Shakespeare at several points in their school careers; and, students need some awareness of the Bible as it relates to and informs literature. Accordingly, they should have the opportunity to read the most relevant texts, including, possibly, Genesis, the Book of job, the Psalms, The Epistles of St. Paul, and the Sermon on the Mount. Why? Why Shapespeare again (even in an American Lit. class, as I was forced to do in the 60's). And

why the Christian bible and why the particular texts suggested, to the exclusion of other religions' central works or to other significant books of the Christian bible. How does one handle the non-believers or the varying Christian sects even within such a proposal? Difficult, and I submit unnecessary problems if everyone has to do it as part of a required core curriculum.

These are some of what I see as con arguments regarding core curricula. There are obviously more, and I hope we hear some from the reactors and from the audience. What might be better? What would I suggest instead? First, understand that I am not opposed to a school's English department discussing and deciding what books might be appropriate for teaching at particular grade levels, so that several teachers of different grades do not teach the same works in-depth. But I'd prefer that these discussions happen at the school site level or the district level in a two or three school district. But the more diverse the school community being served, the more diverse should be the discussions and the choices. A large, urban or suburban district should not proclaim the same for all, but rather should suggest and let the site decide. Most core curriculum proponents would hold that the state or at least the district should prescribe, but I think local control should extend to the school site instead.

Next,in order for any literature program to work well, resources need to be provided for the purchase of appropriate materials. When districts too tightly control the purchasing, they too tightly control the curriculum emphases as well. School sites need to have some discretion in selecting not only core

works for in-class study but also in supplying the extended and recreational reading material which make the most sense for the variety of school population being served in the school.

Third, some of the values that the business community wants us to foster in our students are often the antithesis of the values that emerge from the in-depth study of many prominent literary works, especially some of the contemporary works which are deserving of classroom study. The business community needs workers that are punctual, honest, cooperative, trustworthy, compliant, team players, and loyal. Quite often literature portrays characters who exert their independence, their dissidence, their individuality, and their distrust of the system. When English teachers are prohibited from teaching the latter kinds of materials, often the case when there is a district core curriculum, the students suffer and the society suffers. We need to resist core curriculum efforts which transmit a heritage of passivity, of uniformity, of narrowness, and to support a curriculum which promotes critical applications of knowledge, which fosters independent thinking and action, and which recognizes and celebrates diversity as the most cherished of our American heritage.

The cries for higher standards in our schools, for reform in curriculum and in teaching, and for a more literate citizenry are real cries and must be addressed by all of us in the educational endeavor. But I don't think a return to the days of sameness for all students in our English classrooms, which is a probable

by-product of a core curriculum in literature, is the direction we should be headed.